

The Next Big Thing In Conservation Policy



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Since the early 1930's soil conservation policy has been largely focused on preventing soil erosion and, in more recent decades, policies have broadened to protect water and air quality. But now, more conservation experts suggest that national policies aimed at improving organic matter and more generally, policies that enhance soil health, should be the top priority for the decades ahead.

Why? For farmers and ranchers, it's primarily about improving profitability and protecting the environment by building healthier soils. Many enjoyed substantially higher yields – even during this year's drought.

Organic matter enhances water and nutrient holding capacity and improves soil structure, according to USDA's NRCS. "Managing for soil carbon can enhance productivity and environmental quality, and can reduce the severity and costs of natural phenomena, such as drought, flood, and disease. In addition, increasing soil organic matter levels can reduce atmospheric CO2 levels that contribute to climate change," the agency notes.

"In many ways, we've been trying to regulate backwards," says Jim Moseley, an Indiana farmer who served as USDA Deputy Secretary from "If we fix the soil, we can address both water and air quality concerns and reduce soil erosion."

Moseley was one of several conservationists who participated in a recent panel, sponsored by the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) as part of their 30th anniversary celebration in Creve Couer, MO. The panel, which I moderated, also included Fred Luckey of Field to Market, the Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture; Indiana no-till farmer Dan DeSutter; Larry Clemens of The Nature Conservancy; Jerry Hatfield, director of the USDA-ARS National Laboratory for Agriculture and the Environment.

All of the panelists agreed that soil degradation was costing farmers money and harming future productivity. Conversely, they cited several examples where nutrient costs were substantially reduced and yields improved when farmers understand and nurture the complex underground ecosystem in farm soils.

DeSutter said a two percent increase in organic matter is worth between \$40-50/acre in reduced input costs. The Indiana farmer emphasized the grand scale of soil biology, pointing out that every acre of healthy agricultural soil contains tons of fungi, bacteria and organic matter that sustain crops. "We already have livestock on the farm," he noted. "They're underground."

USDA's Hatfield described corn that produced 290 bu. acre in a simulated Iowa fencerow this

year – despite the hot, dry growing conditions.

"We need to start with the biology – that helps solve problems in the soil," advised USDA's Hatfield. But he also cautioned that extra yield will not come for free. "Climate variability is going to wreak havoc in how we manage the soil."

Several of the panelists called for establishing a new national standard for improving organic matter, much like conservationists once called for with "T", the maximum annual soil loss that can occur on a particular type of soil while sustaining long-term agricultural productivity. Others suggested some type of a "compliance" mechanism, linking conservation payments to improvements in organic matter.

"The U.S. could be a world leader in improving soil health, setting an example for other countries," emphasized Fred Luckey of Field to Market, the Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture.

NRCS initiative

The panelists' comments echoed many of the same themes expressed by current Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Dave White as he kicked off a new soil health campaign last month. The agency has developed a wealth of soil health resources and manages several different types of conservation programs that can be utilized to improve soil health.

"This initiative will help our farmers meet current and future demands for American-grown agriculture by encouraging good soil and natural resources practices that are beneficial to their operations," said White. "We understand that soils and farms vary across the country, so our job is to provide farmers the very best information available to meet their unique needs and help their business thrive."

White said that some of the principles have been around for decades, while some are new and some are newly rediscovered. He wants to make sure that producers are able to walk into a NRCS office and have a laundry list of practices that they may be able to utilize to increase their soil health.

White toured a farm where a local grower promoted soil health by eliminating plowing and by mixing cover crops. His soil was rich in spongy organic matter that feeds crops and holds more than its own weight in water. As a result, the grower witnessed significantly higher yields – even after being hard hit by the drought.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) awareness and education effort features farmers from communities in numerous states – Ohio, Indiana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Utah, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Montana and Kansas – where growers are increasingly interested in how improved soil health can benefit their operations.

To "Unlock the Secrets in the Soil," go to NRCS's soil quality page or contact your local NRCS office. Δ

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